

## A First Opinion: Exploring the Power of Art in a Young Girl's Life

Bryant, Jen. *Pieces of Georgia*. New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2006.

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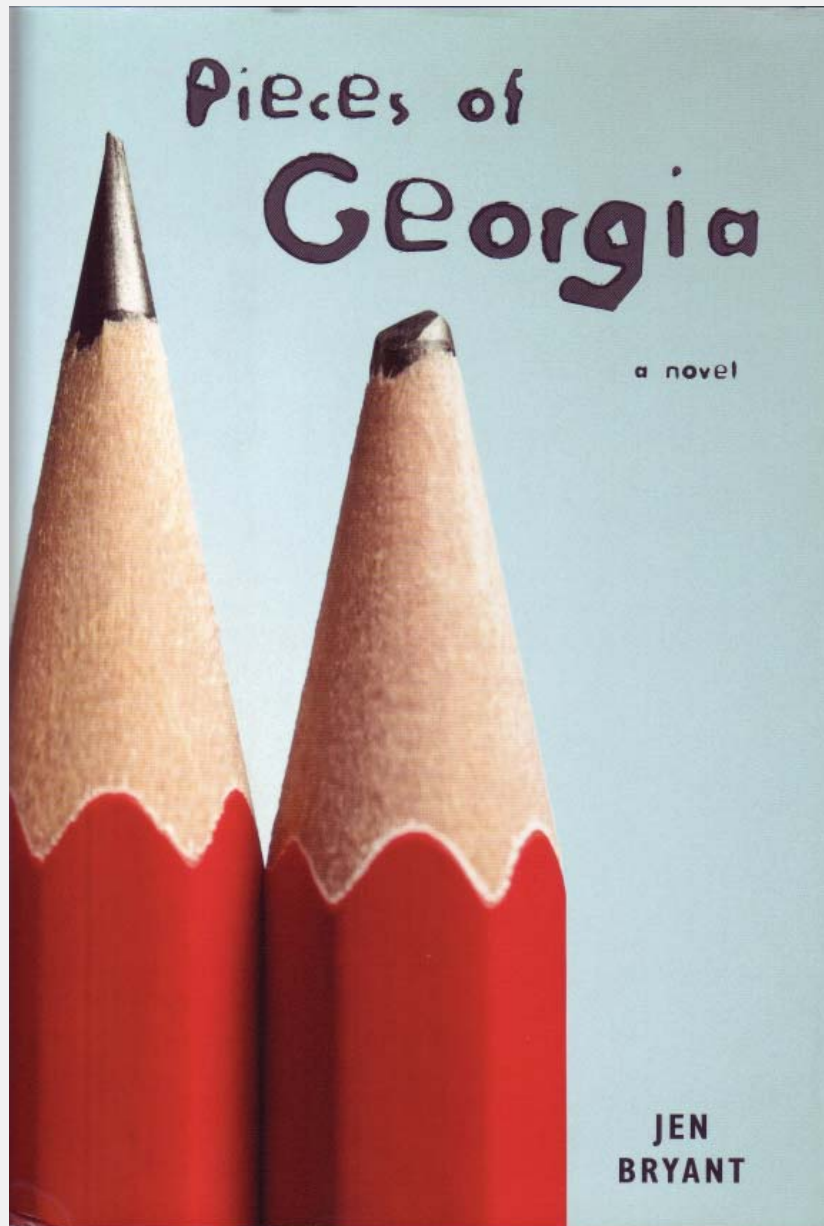
This novel is written in epistolary form from the perspective of a middle-school girl, Georgia McCoy, who lives in a rented trailer with her father, a construction worker. Her mother died suddenly when she was young, and she and her father have been estranged from her extended family since before she was born. A concerned guidance counselor at school gave her a journal in which to write her thoughts and feelings about her mother, whose artistic talent was passed posthumously on to her daughter. Thus begin the poetic musings of an isolated and melancholy seventh-grade girl who prefers the company of horses and dogs to her peers, a girl with an artist's eye for detail and a poetic command of language.

But how realistic is this character or her situation? That depends. The value of realism in literature lies in characters and situations that provide inspiration or vicarious experiences to broaden a reader's worldview. Certainly, Georgia embodies the Other in the contemporary adolescent social milieu, offering alternative perspectives in a culture that is obsessed with pervasive media images of artificial young women. Also, her reticence in school and recurrent stomach aches may be all too familiar to educators who deal with troubled, disadvantaged adolescents, emphasizing the overwhelming need many have for adult mentors and role models. The quiet appreciation of beauty evinced by Georgia throughout her writing should forge strong emotional connections with readers of any age. The importance of art and introduction to the work of artists like Georgia O'Keeffe and Wyeth in the novel add to the realism of the fictional situation, and the ending provides inspiration for teachers and students alike to believe in their abilities.

Georgia's voice, however, is not always authentically adolescent. Given that the novel is ostensibly a journal written by a seventh grader, and one who has never done so before, her command of poetic language is unrealistically mature. While this may not be unusual for a child who has had a difficult life, at times her voice just does not ring true. For example, she describes Georgia O'Keeffe as an "artist who painted flowers and bones / so that you see them fresh, / like they are secret worlds you can lose yourself inside / if the real one gets too bad" (15) and describes her mother's death metaphorically, comparing it to a hawk that "must have come out of nowhere, / and before you could yell for

help or do anything at all about it, / it wrapped its claws around you / and carried you off” (57). This also illustrates how Georgia’s life and outlook are unrelentingly sad; maybe this is realism, but some wit and fun might have not only enlivened the language but also provided depth of character.

Even so, I found I could not put this book down. Adolescent readers would certainly be inspired to pick up a sketchpad and try their hand after reading of the redemptive value of art for a kid like Georgia.



## A Second Reaction: A Character Troubled Students Can Relate To

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*Pieces of Georgia* was engaging and intriguing to my students, who found the themes and ideas within the story realistically relevant. To some degree, each of my students was able to look at the main character and draw similarities between Georgia's experiences and the events that have transpired in his or her own life. The voice that spoke to my students was friendly and somewhat familiar, as Georgia spoke to her audience as an underprivileged adolescent coping with life's difficult hardships.

My students were readied for engagement upon their first glance at the book. For them, the cover of a book acts as a vehicle either of motivation or deterrence. Even as one student said, "The pencils on the cover of that book make it look school related, so I won't enjoy reading that," I found myself comfortable with presenting the book and confident that they would find it interesting and worthwhile. As I set out to read the opening page, I did so by first calling attention to the unconventional layout of the text. Georgia's account, written in poetic form, made it somewhat easier for the students to engage themselves in the novel, as they are always motivated to live and learn against the norm and status quo.

While most of the feedback I received about the novel was positive, I did have some students who initially decided, "I don't like reading. I won't read. You can't make me, and that book looks dumb anyway." As I have mentioned, the cover of a book weighs heavily in importance to my students; however, most of the students who found the cover to be an indication of a "boring" or "stupid" story either eventually grew interested in the novel or adamantly refused to participate in the readings and activities. I was surprised when one boy, who has a general lack of interest in reading and writing, came up to me after reading the novel and said, "I liked the book. Georgia is a lot like me. I like art and I like to draw and write. I don't care who looks at it or who reads it because it's for me. It's how I deal with the death of my own mother."

It is possible that my personal interests and experiences have led me to a conclusion much different from those who have first reviewed the novel. I work with emotionally disabled children on a daily basis and it is clear that their lives are somewhat different from children enrolled in general education settings; however, their lives seem similar to the

life of Georgia McCoy. Most of my children are under the care and guardianship of either a single parent, a grandparent, or foster parents. My children have seen responsibilities, hardships, and disappointments that extend far beyond the expectations of “normal” adolescent children. The seemingly fictional situation of Georgia McCoy is indeed a very real situation for many children and adolescents, regardless of disability in the world today. It is in looking beyond the privileges of our own middle-class lives, which have been further influenced and clouded by academic pursuits, that we are able to see that the situations of Georgia are more realistic than we think.

My time working with school-aged children has been brief but nonetheless valuable. I have learned that underprivileged adolescents have the same potential to learn and express themselves in a poetic and artistic manner. Contrary to the views and opinions of those who appear to know very little about the capabilities of adolescents, underprivileged or otherwise, children are blessed with many talents regardless of their circumstances. That factor makes Georgia a credible and likeable character in my eyes and in the eyes of my students. In my experience, students with hardships, including those with emotional and learning disabilities, express themselves best through an alternative or nonconventional manner, and the written and verbal products of their overactive imaginations can be seen even by the oldest, most experienced, most educated adults as absolutely astounding.